



# BIRCH BARK TALKING

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# Birch Bark Talking

*A Resumé of the Life and Work of the*



REV. JAMES EVANS

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THE BOARD OF HOME MISSIONS  
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*for the*  
JAMES EVANS CENTENARY COMMITTEE  
THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

## FOREWORD

THIS account of the life and work of Rev. James Evans tells the story of a remarkable achievement in Canadian Home Missions.

The long journey to Norway House, more than three hundred miles north of the site of the future city of Winnipeg, with none of the modern means of transportation, was in 1840 an adventure in itself. To be the first missionary in such an isolated outpost was a sure claim to distinction. It was, however, the invention of a new alphabet, which subsequently became the medium of communication on the Indian reserves over the greater part of northern Canada, which placed his name first in the list of benefactors of the Canadian Indians.

The General Council has decided that the centenary of the arrival of Mr. Evans in Norway House should be observed in 1940 and ordered the appointment of a Centenary Committee representative of the whole Church, with an Executive of residents in Manitoba.

It has been decided that the main celebration should be held in Norway House in June, 1940, and on every reserve where a United Church mission is established there will be as far as possible a simultaneous observance. It is hoped that the story of this unique achievement will be told in every United Church pulpit in Canada. The permanent memorial will take the form of a James Evans Memorial Bursary.

This interesting and informing booklet should be widely read and preserved as a record of the work of a truly great Home Missionary.

JOHN W. WOODSIDE,

*Moderator*

Ottawa, February 1st, 1940.

## Birch Bark Talking



I looked upon a treasure to-day. I know it is a treasure because it is kept in a vault, behind a door made of steel that opens only to the one who possesses the combination. The treasure itself reposes in an unimpressive cardboard box, and is rather miscellaneous in character. In fact, the casual observer would regard it as material fit for the rubbish heap rather than for the vault. I could not borrow any part of it. I could only inspect it under the watchful eye of its custodian, the Librarian of Victoria University, Toronto.

My eye was attracted to a little book. I had heard about it, a hymnbook printed on birch bark and bound with a deerskin cover. I had thought of it as being a bulky volume. But no, it was just a little book that one could slip easily into his coat pocket; a book about five inches long and four inches wide, with leaves like coarse white paper yellow-flecked. The printing, a series of heiroglyphics with no meaning to my untrained eye, represented something unique, the result of the creative mind of a man at work on a problem that demanded solution. Yes, it was a very modest little volume, but around it cluster memories of an achievement as romantic as any that grace the pages of history.

There was another book in the box. It was about the same size, but made of real paper, bearing the imprint of a publishing house in New York, and dated 1836. It was entitled "Speller and Interpreter in Indian and English," and purported to be a textbook for use in the study of the Ojibway language. What cumbersome combinations the familiar Roman letters formed as they spelled out strange words for "dog" and "cow" and "pig"! A difficult task it would be for one speaking

[illegible]

Great cover on a son of a bitch! (punch)  
 Creech took a strong punch to the inside of the jaw.

the English language to become fluent in Ojibway, especially where several Roman letters were necessary to approximate the peculiar Indian sounds not found in the English language. Evidently the man who produced the "Speller and Interpreter in Indian and English" was not only a man of genius, but also had at his disposal an inexhaustible fund of patience.

But there were other interesting articles in the box as well. In one corner lay a little metal container whose glass ends revealed several rectangular pieces of lead, each bearing the outline of a syllabic character used in printing the hymnbook. These were samples of the original type made from bullets and lead taken from the lining of tea chests.

And then I came upon a letter in the handwriting of James Evans. It was dated "Forks of the Assiniboin River, June 11, 1841" and was addressed to Rev. Joseph Stinson, General Superintendent of Wesleyan Missions, Toronto, acknowledging the receipt of a letter from Mr. Stinson written November 7, 1840. Just a trifle over seven months on the way! No wonder Mr. Evans facetiously remarked in his opening paragraph, "You can readily perceive that neither Cincinnati steamers nor the mile-per-minute cars bore it to its long-sought destination." It is an interesting letter, and a valuable one from an historical point of view, as we shall see presently. In a touching passage toward the end, the writer refers to his people in Upper Canada and asks pardon for this "tear-made blot" which still induces a momentary fullness of the throat and mistiness of the eye after ninety-eight years as one pictures the lonely pioneer on the "Forks of the Assiniboin River."

One more "jewel" in the "treasure chest" is worthy of a passing note. It is a translation of the Book of Genesis in the Cree syllabary in the handwriting of John Sinclair, the son of a Hudson's Bay official and a Cree woman, and one of Evans' chief assistants in the work of translation and publication.



These valuable documents, and others yet uncovered, lie awaiting the hand of some competent and devoted scholar who will undertake the task of giving to the world an authoritative picture of a man who, in a short life of forty-five years, seventeen of which were spent in ministering to the Indians, gave to a primitive people a written language whose principles could be mastered in a day. Thus was provided the basis for a literature which not only gave to them the story of the Gospel, and opened for them the literary resources of the world, but enshrined for posterity the few folk tales and traditions of their people.

### SAILOR APPRENTICE

The story of James Evans is not a long one, but it is filled with human interest as it moves rapidly from point to point. One would suspect, reviewing that story in the perspective of the years, that he was a lad of boundless energy and adventurous spirit. In his boyhood days, the dark clouds of an imminent French invasion hung over England. Napoleon was the master of Europe, and only British stubbornness stood between him and world power. Captain Evans was the master of a sailing vessel plying the Baltic routes. At the age of eight years James stood up in the family circle and urged that he be allowed to go to sea. School had lost its attraction. Nothing could take the place of "the sea, the sea, the open sea." It was calling him and he must go.

Captain Evans was an astute judge of men and of boys, too, as James was soon to find out. He had seen enough of that hard life and recognized that the day of the sailing vessel was well-nigh past. So, much to his delight, James found himself duly installed in the exalted position of cabin-boy on his father's ship, sailing over the stormy North Sea and headed for the Baltic. Fun was at a minimum and work at a maximum. Hardtack and salt meat were the daily delicacies. Orders, curt and rough, sent him scampering about a

# Shoreline, Rossville, Norman, 1930

Indian Mission

Church  
 Warehouse  
 House

Missionary's Residential

Residence

School

Principals  
 Residence

Agents Office

variety of tasks. The captain's son fetched and carried just as did any other apprentice to the sea. Two voyages into the Baltic, in wild and bitter weather, turned the trick. James went to school again.

### LOCAL PREACHER

Whatever dreams he may have had of an adventurous life in the South Seas or among the redskins of America must have suffered a sudden demise when James found himself, at the conclusion of his schooling, apprenticed to a greener. Weighing out sugar and counting out candles, packaging currants and casting up accounts, a dull life indeed! But James' master was a devout man who encouraged him in attendance at services of worship. To the local church came the Irish evangelist, Gideon Ouseley, seeking aid for his struggling Methodist Societies. The pointed eloquence of the preacher went to the soul of the lad. He saw himself a sinner. He felt the power of divine forgiveness and found himself reconciled to his God. Life glowed with new radiance after that, and work in the grocery store assumed its proper place in the midst of larger issues. James found his niche in "the plan" which was a distinctive feature of the work of Methodist Societies. Every layman who desired and had the ability to do so, was made a leader in some such enterprise as preaching, visiting, and the conducting of prayer or Bible study groups. Ordained ministers in those days were few and far apart, but the tasks of teaching, preaching and poor relief went on under the leadership of laymen in the rapidly extending Methodist bodies. James was placed on "the plan" first as a prayer leader, and later as a local preacher, the highest honour to which a layman could aspire. Week-nights and Sundays found him busy in the villages round about, explaining the Scriptures and pointing out the Jesus way of life as he himself had experienced it.

The scene changes. The Evans family struck its English tents and crossed the Atlantic to find a new home

in Canada, at Lachute in Québec. James, meanwhile, had secured a position in a glass and crockery establishment in London where the attractions and distractions of city life cooled his early Christian ardour. But after two years, in 1823, he yielded to family solicitations and followed his people to their Canadian home.

#### UPPER CANADA SCHOOL TEACHER

Openings for well-qualified grocery clerks were few in this new land. But school teachers were in demand. Certificates of academic standing were not required. A liking for books and the ability to preserve order were the essentials. The schoolhouse, constructed of roughly-hewn cedar logs, was equipped with benches of split green planks, fresh from the woods. All in all, it was crude, but then so was the teacher, and so were the pupils. It was an adventure together in education. Evans' first school was near L'Orignal. He entered upon his task with enthusiasm. His was a strong mind, and his teaching was attended with marked success. It was during these academic years that his pathway crossed that of Miss Mary Blithe Smith and they were married after a short courtship. It was a fortunate and happy union for she entered heartily into his work, shared the joys and the hardships with good spirit, and ably supported him to the end.

In 1825, two years after his marriage, the little Evans family moved into Upper Canada and there, at a camp meeting at Augusta, both James Evans and his wife found their hearts again "strangely warmed within them" and dedicated their lives anew to the service of God and their fellow men. This was the turning point, marking another apprenticeship in the life of the man, preparing him for the culminating achievement of his career.

Let us turn our attention for a moment to the Indian Missions of Upper Canada. The year after James Evans from his cradle first looked out with wide eyes upon his little world, Nathan Bangs rode across the Niagara

frontier, a young surveyor in pursuit of his work. He remained as a circuit-rider, carrying all his worldly possessions in his saddle bags, and bearing the message of the Gospel to lonely homesteaders, isolated villagers and Indian tribes. His care for the Indians was shared by William Case whose work made Indian Missions really live for he saw that more than a church building and church services were necessary. The full needs of the people must be met. He would build schools, train teachers and preachers, instruct the children, provide good literature, develop manual and industrial training, and so assist the Indian to become a God-fearing, intelligent and self-supporting citizen. How modern that sounds after one hundred years!

Rev. Alvin Terry had been sent to the Grand River. There Peter Jones was converted, and it was from the platform of the Methodist Conference at Hull's Corners, near Cobourg, that Indians from the Rice Lake Reserve, coming on special invitation, heard for the first time the message of the Gospel proclaimed and interpreted by one of their own race who was to become an eloquent preacher, translator and author. That event opened the way for Jones to visit them. A church was built. They asked for a school and a schoolmaster. James Evans was the man appointed.

### MISSIONARY NOVICE

In this task, the teacher found himself. He taught the Indians the art of house-building. They taught him their language. He had first to win the confidence of the children, and he knew he had succeeded when they came to his school, sixty strong.

It was in 1828 that Evans began his teaching mission on the south shore of Rice Lake. It was in 1830 that he was received as a probationer for the ministry. During those two years he translated eighteen chapters of Genesis and twenty Psalms into the Ojibway language, and prepared an Ojibway vocabulary. It was difficult

work fitting the Roman letters to Ojibway words, and already Evans was intuitively feeling that there must be a simpler way. But this was the established method. He could but follow on.

### ORDAINED MINISTER

We may note in passing that in 1831 Evans went as a missionary to the Credit, and in 1833, after ordination, was stationed at St. Catharines. But it was his ministry at St. Clair that marked another important milestone in his career. He went there to a people more than ordinarily superstitious, immoral and debauched. He went with his translations of the Bible and of many hymns. His personality inspired respect. His passionate love for his work, and his resolute bearing convinced the St. Clair Indians that he meant business. A sweeping revival supported by untiring pastoral work revolutionized the life of that community. Drunkenness and immorality vanished almost completely from its midst.

### SCIENTIFIC LANGUAGE STUDENT

It was his studies in the Ojibway language while here that laid the foundation for the work which he later carried through in the West. Here he completed his "Speller and Interpreter in Indian and English" and was authorized to go to New York to have it printed along with certain translations of Scriptures and hymns. Four months in that city finished the work. Evans travelled both ways as a deck passenger because he lacked funds to purchase more comfortable accommodation. Finding no means of transportation from London to St. Clair, he made himself a raft with a little cabin mounted thereon, and floated down the Thames and up the St. Clair to his destination.

From the introduction to the "Speller and Interpreter in Indian and English" we cull this interesting paragraph which indicates the essentially scientific spirit with which he approached his task:



Secretary of Methodist Mission Board and Missionaries to the Indians  
taken at Brandon, 1900.

*Top Row (left to right)–* E. R. Steinhauer, J. A. McLaughlin, J. A. Dorgue, C. E. Somerset, F. G. Stevens,  
R. B. Steinhauer, Edward Paupanakis.

*Bottom Row (left to right)–* S. D. Gaudin, O. R. German, Dr. John McDougall, Dr. Alexander Sutherland,  
John Nelson, E. B. Glass.

"The author's object during several years of attentive investigation has been to discover first the true position of the organs of the various sounds of the Ojibway language; and secondly, to select from the Roman letters such characters as in their English sound are most analogous to the Ojibway. The consonants used in this work are b, d, g, j, m, n, z, s, each character (except m and n which are purely English) representing a compound sound never found in our language. The vowels are four in number, viz., a, e, o, u, each representing a short perfect vowel sound. These vowels doubled as aa, ee, oo, uu, express the long sounds of the same vowels, remaining under this prolongation perfect vowels; requiring, however, a stronger emission of the breath than the short a, e, o, u, which has led in some instances to their being written with the English preceding them when, in fact, no aspiration expressed by this letter in English is found in the Ojibway language."

Note the "years of attentive investigation" before he was satisfied that he had included all the elemental sounds of the language. Note, too, the comparison of these with the analogous English sounds on the basis of "the position of the organs" of speech in their formation. Modern phonetics in all language schools follows the same principle. He had also discovered that there were but four vowels and eight consonants in the Ojibway language, and six of these consonants had no equivalent in the English. One may infer from a remark in his letter of June 11, 1841, referred to above, that he had at this time already prepared a syllabic alphabet of some sort, but that its use was disapproved by the British and Foreign Bible Society in Toronto. Evidently it was felt that the use of Roman letters in translations was too well established.

#### **SUPERINTENDENT OF MISSIONS**

The next two years find Evans on a trip to the Indian tribes along the shores of Lake Superior, and again as



the minister of a congregation in Guelph. But, unknown to him, events in Canada's great new West were shaping the mould into which the remaining years of his life were to be cast. The Hudson's Bay Company were finding their annual trade in furs declining. An investigation showed that Indians were drifting south. It was a strange phenomenon, and it was important that the cause be found. In some way it had to be checked. The answer to the problem was an unexpected one. Indian hunters from the south, visiting in the wigwams of their brothers in the north, had been telling of Gitchi Manito, the Great Spirit, the Father of the white man and of Indian alike. In the wigwams of the white man to the south was to be found a Book which told of the goodness and kindness of the Great Spirit. Very well, they would go south to the Red River, where missionaries of the Church of England were at work, and find this Book.

Therefore, from the headquarters of the Hudson's Bay Company went forth an order. Indians were to be assured that in the north country the Book would be provided and the wisdom of the white man would become the wisdom of the Indian. The English Wesleyan Church was asked to furnish missionaries and establish missions from Hudson's Bay to the Rockies. The Company offered to provide canoes, provisions, interpreters and houses without cost, to give the missionaries the same rank as commissioned officers and pay them the same allowance. The invitation was accepted. George Barnley, Robert T. Rundle and William Mason were named as missionaries from England, and James Evans was invited to superintend the work.

Evans hesitated. Relations were somewhat strained between his denomination and the Wesleyans. He knew, too, that the Hudson's Bay Company was a despotic ruler, demanding that missionaries should not interfere with the manner in which the Company promoted its trade. He did not like the stipulation that all

reports to the Society should be submitted to the Company before publication. His hesitation was not for long, however. His concern for the Indians in the wilds, and the call of the unknown, stirred his blood. Difficulties faded into the background. Preparations for the trip were begun.

The British contingent left Liverpool on March 16th, reaching New York April 12th. Evans, with his wife and daughter, and two native missionaries, Peter Jacobs and Henry B. Steinhauer, went to Montreal to join the canoe brigade there, but missing them by two or three days they sent their baggage on via England and York Factory, while they themselves took boat by way of the Great Lakes, thence by canoe to Norway House three hundred miles north of the Winnipeg of today.

Norway House was strategically situated. Boats to and from Red River, York Factory, Athabasca and Mackenzie River passed that way. The new Superintendent's parish extended five hundred miles south-east to Fort Frances, five hundred miles north-east of that point to Moose Factory on James Bay, to Edmonton and Rocky Mountain House one thousand miles west from Norway House. All travel would be by canoe and dog train.

Evans' first winter in this new home was spent in instructing the people and studying the language. In the spring, he chose as his mission site Playgreen Island, two miles from the Hudson's Bay post, and because of his friendship with the factor, Donald Ross, he called it Rossville. With the aid of Indian friends, a school, a church, a parsonage and some twenty houses were built. The Crees were wandering nomads scattering into the forests in small groups for trapping in the winter and clustering in wigwams round the Company posts in the summer. They were ignorant and superstitious, but lacked the war-like characteristics of many other tribes. Under Evans' teaching these people were soon spending their summers in gardening, in place of idleness.

He taught the children reading, writing and arithmetic. His preaching was attended by many conversions. Life in the district became gradually transformed. The power of the medicine man was eclipsed.

The Company and Indians alike urged Evans to visit tribes in the forests. His dog team, half dog and half wolf, became famous for its speed and endurance. His canoe, fashioned of tin and named by the Indians "The Island of Light" became a familiar sight in those northern waters. Not uncommon was it for him to make trips from Hudson's Bay to the Rocky Mountains. Here is a paragraph from his letter of June 11, 1841, from the Forks of the Assiniboine:

#### INDEFATIGABLE TRAVELLER

"I have been at all the ports within three or four hundred miles of my station, and expect, D.V., to visit York Factory on Hudson's Bay immediately on my return to Norway House, and on my return from that port to leave in September for Cumberland, Carlton, Fort Pitt, Edmonton, Jaspar's House and Fort Assiniboine by water, and thence proceed by snow to Rocky Mountain House, Fort Dunveguin, Fort Vermilion to Slave Lake, Athabasca, Fort Chippewayan, Isle a Croix and back to Norway House in July, 1842, if God preserve my life a short tour of about six thousand miles. I bless God for good health and a good constitution and trust in him as the God of Providence as well as Grace."

#### CREATIVE GENIUS

In teaching the Indians to read, Evans tried out his syllabic alphabet adjusted to their language. Some birch bark and the pointed end of a charred stick were his teaching tools. It caught. Adults and children learned its simple characters. As he travelled to and fro he taught it to the nomadic tribes. It fired the imagination. Birch bark talking! It was a new idea and an exciting one. There was a mystery. The Indians

became anxious to know the secret for themselves, anxious to know the white man's religion, too. His knowledge and his tools were superior to theirs- his religion must be superior also. Birch bark music was good, coming as the discovery of a new faculty to the Indians, who previously did not know that they could sing. Nor did they wait for teachers or for schools. They taught each other. The new art spread with amazing rapidity.

The record of progress is best understood from Evans' own diary:

"September 15, 1840 I commenced a school on the opposite side of the river and had about twenty-five scholars anxious to learn, teaching them to read the English and their own tongue.

"Oct. 15 Several of the boys know all the letters, having written the alphabet for each; and they are much pleased with their new books, but not more so than I am myself.

"Oct. 19 Several of the boys are beginning to read the written hymns in the Cree character, and I yet feel encouraged to think that I can print them in a few days.

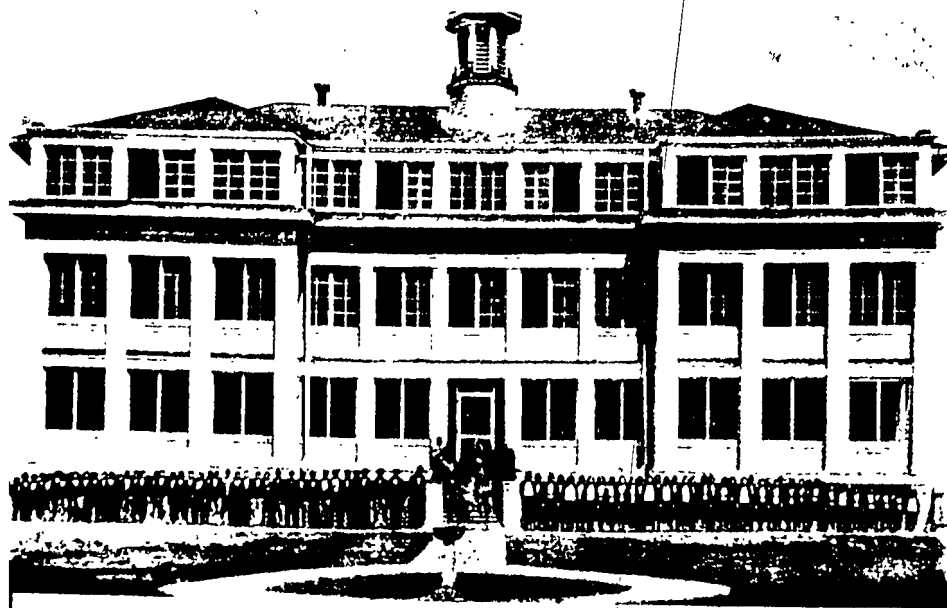
"Dec. 3 The Indians and children sing these hymns well and several read with some fluency. The short time which is required to learn to read and to write arises from there being no such thing as learning to spell, every character in the alphabet being a syllable, so that when these are learned, all is learned. Several of the boys and young men can write any word in the language, seldom committing an error."

In that country, the Cree language was regarded by the other tribes as the classic form of their speech. It was largely a language of open syllables linked together in words of great length and equivalent to our phrase or even to our sentence. The roots of the language were essentially the same as those of the Ojibway, though modified by different environment and local usage.



*Above* --Residence at Norway House where James Evans produced his Birch Bark Books.

*Below*-- Norway House Indian Residential School, staff and students, inheritors of the James Evans tradition.



The simplicity of the syllabary was a remarkable achievement. We have already noted his discovery, in the Ojibway branch of the Algonquin family of languages, that it could be reduced to an alphabet of eight consonants and four vowels. The writing of this alphabet in syllabic form was a stroke of genius. The entire syllabary of the language was encompassed in nine characters of four positions each. The four positions represented the four vowel sounds in open syllables. One of the nine, in four positions, represented the four vowels with light breathing. The other eight represented the consonants as combined with the vowels in the position designating each vowel sound.

#### INVENTOR AND PRINTER

But Evans was soon faced with the exasperating and stubborn fact that this discovery would be of little avail unless the people had something to read. If he could only provide them with the Scriptures and hymns in the syllabary, they would soon spread the message across the north and west. How could it be done?

The question haunted him. Here he was, a thousand miles from a railway; no paper; no ink; no knowledge of the technique of printing; no press with which to print, and none to be had since the Hudson's Bay Company had forbidden the use of one in the country, fearing, doubtless, that with the spread of knowledge their fur monopoly could not readily be maintained. So, with nothing in hand but a jack-knife, and with the determination that it must be done, Evans started to work. His method was that of trial and error. He whittled out his characters with the knife. With lead procured from the lining of tea chests, and from bullets, he made the type. His Indian pupils prepared birch bark for paper. Soot from the chimney, mixed with such animal oil or grease as he could obtain, made his printing ink, and the printing was done on a fur-baling press provided by the Hudson's Bay Company.

Let us turn again to his diary for the story of his success.

"Sept. 28, 1840 For a fortnight I have been endeavouring to cast type to print the Cree language, but every attempt hitherto has failed. I have no proper materials, neither type material nor any other thing requisite. I hope, however, to conquer the difficulties and begin printing in a few weeks or months at the furthest

"Sept. 30th I cut types in lead of ~~two~~ characters, and took moulds in clay, chalk, putty, sand, and tried some other fruitless experiments

"Oct. 13 I cast a plate of hardened lead, polished it and commenced cutting an alphabet, making a sort of stereotype plate.

"Oct. 15 Last night I finished the alphabet plate and today I printed a few sheets.

"Nov. 11 My type answers well. The hymn "Jesus My All to Heaven is Gone" is in the press. I have struck off three hundred copies of the first three verses, making a small page. I have got excellent type considering the country and the materials and at last they make a tolerably good impression. The letters or characters I cut in finely polished oak. I filed out of one side of an inch square bar of iron the square of the body of type, and after placing the bar with the notch over the latter, I applied another polished bar to the face of the mould and poured in the lead after that had been separately melted to harden it. These require a little dressing on the face and filing to a uniform square and length and answer well.

"Nov. 17th I have today struck off 250 copies of the hymn, "Behold the Saviour of Mankind" with a chorus for occasional use. My press is very rude but I am anticipating better days."

The oft-quoted letter from the Forks of the Assiniboin, June 11, 1841, tells another story:

"I have made a fount of Indian type and everything necessary, besides making a nearly four-months' voyage have printed about five thousand pages in the Mushkego language. Among other things a small volume of hymns etc., which I bound, 100 copies of 16 pages each. For this purpose I prepared a syllabic alphabet, such as I presented to the Bible Society in Toronto in 1836 and which they disapproved. It is composed of nine letters, varied to represent every sound in the language. Adapted to the Ojibway and all the kindred dialects, to the Assiniboins, the Crees, Mushkegos, the Blackfeet near the mountains, and indeed with some slight alterations, not at all affecting the primitive sounds adequate to writing every language from the Atlantic to the Rocky Mountains. The men, women and children at Norway House write and speak it with ease and fluency. As do some European gentlemen who speak the languages of the Indians in different parts. It is in its construction precisely like the English. Icab. Ucab. Ucutk. I see a bee. You are a bee. You see Utica. This is all my sheet will allow on this subject."

One hundred copies of a sixteen-page hymnbook, on sheets of birch bark, with a cover of deerskin, one of them at least still readable after ninety-eight years!

It was not long before Evans' brother, Dr. Ephraim Evans, and Dr. Hoole prevailed upon the Hudson's Bay Company to send out a printing press on condition that it would be used exclusively for missionary purposes. And now to furnish a literature! Little was available from medicine man or orator. It had to be borrowed from the white man. So, translations of the Scriptures, liturgies, hymns and catechisms furnished the body of it. Roman Catholic, Anglican and Methodist alike employed the Cree syllabary for such work.

#### AN HONoured PROPHEt

Rev. Nathaniel Burwash, in his paper Before the Royal Society of Canada, May 6th, 1911, ably points out the



significance of Evans' work from a literary and educational standpoint:

"A recent writer has called our attention to the fact that almost every member of the Algonquin tribes who occupy the hinterland of our country from the headwaters of the Ottawa to the Rocky Mountains, can read his own language. Still more remarkable is the fact that they do this with little, and most of them with no aid, from schools. Mission schools, it is true, exist here and there, but their work is supplemented and often anticipated by a process of individual transmission. A piece of birch bark and a charred stick are the implements, and in half a day an Indian who has learned the secret of 'making birch-bark talk' transmits it to his companion. Seventy years ago nothing of this kind existed among these tribes. They had an extremely imperfect picture writing which was significant only as a prompter to the memory of their old men, but they had absolutely no means of putting their language into written form. Now it can be easily written and read by even the women and children, and already a considerable literature has grown up among them as a result of this newly-acquired power. This is, we think, a fact unique in the entire history of civilization."

### CONQUEROR OF TRAGEDY

But dark clouds of tragedy and disappointment were beginning to cast their shadow. With two of his Indian canoe-men, Evans set out for a summer itinerary. One of them, Thomas Hassell, a Chippewyan from the Athabasca country, was a successful teacher, speaking Cree, French and English fluently. In the course of the trip, while Evans was handing a gun to Hassell to shoot some game, it accidentally discharged and Hassell received the full charge, dying at once. Heartbroken, Evans and Oig, his remaining companion, turned homeward. After saying good-bye to his family, the white man took the water route alone to the Athabasca

country, knowing full well that Indian custom would demand vengeance upon the killer, even though the deed had been committed unintentionally. He sought out the wigwam of Hassell's family and sat down with them in the attitude of mourning. In tears he told the story. The braves prepared to kill him, but the mother restrained them. Putting her hands on his head, she said, "The white man shall not die. There was no evil in his heart. He loved my son. He shall live and shall be my son in the place of the one who is dead." Evans remained with them for the period of mourning and continued to contribute thereafter to the support of the family.

### PERSECUTED SABBATH-KEEPER

Hassell's tragic death came at a very difficult time for Evans. For some time he had found himself in conflict with the Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company. He had opposed the practice of the Company of supplying intoxicating liquor to the Indians. That, in itself, was an offence to Company officials. But more annoying was the growing indisposition of Christian Indians to work upon the Sabbath day. To Evans, the divine command "remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy" was as binding upon him and other Christian folk in the Hudson's Bay territories as it ever had been in England or Upper Canada. He was convinced that it was for man's physical as well as spiritual good. But of this the Governor could not be persuaded. Company profits demanded that furs should be brought out from the far interior with utmost haste. The Company had its brigades of boats so organized that goods were carried by them into the interior in the early summer and furs caught in the previous year brought back for shipment to England. But distances were great and the difficulties of the routes so many that no brigade could reach the coast from the far interior in any one year. Some of the fur catch, therefore, from the more remote regions



*Above* Dedication of Soldiers' Memorial, Norway House, 1920  
Church in use 1886-1932.

*Below* Norway House Church, erected 1933



would be two and three years on the way. Norway House was a great winter storehouse for the furs, and in spring, as soon as the ice cleared away from lakes and rivers, the brigades would load their boats for the final dash to the coast. Paddling for hours at a stretch and carrying the heavy loads over difficult portages, it was a race all the way. Brigade leaders were paid bonuses for time saved on the trip. Imagine then the consternation when Christian Indians insisted upon resting one day in seven.

It seems evident from the records we have that this was the chief ground for the persecution which followed. No longer could Evans depend upon Company posts to provide for his needs. No longer did he receive a friendly reception from Company officials wherever he called. The Governor was hostile. His officials who depended upon him must be unfriendly, too. Evans even became estranged from his good friend Donald Ross. No matter if Christian Indians did demonstrate that they could travel farther in six days than others did in seven and arrive at the journey's end with both themselves and cargoes in excellent condition. Evans must be removed. How could it be done? Evans found himself one day before a Company court charged with immoral acts in Indian encampments. On the basis of the evidence produced, he was convicted. This incident was used by the Company to demand of the Missionary Society that he should be replaced, and in the face of the judicial evidence, the Society had no alternative but to request his return to England to answer the charges preferred against him.

It was a long, sad business. Evans and his family made the trip by way of Upper Canada where they visited with friends from whom they had been so long separated. But determined investigation of the charges by colleagues in England eventually made it clear that the evidence had been framed through

bribery and coercion. Its purpose had been to rid the country of the troublesome missionary, and in this, it had been eminently successful.

### VICTORIOUS APOSTLE

His name cleared, Evans was free to preach again, and soon found himself in great demand. Night after night, he spoke to crowds in city churches and rural chapels concerning the search of the red man for the Book and a white man to interpret it to him. On Monday, 22nd of November, 1846, he talked to a large audience in Waltham Street Chapel, Hull, for about three hours, insistent demands of the people to hear more urging him on. The following evening he was in Lincolnshire, at Keilby. It was his last address. At the home of his host that night, they talked about his Indian work and of his return to it. Young reports in his book "The Apostle of the North," a short conversation between Evans and his wife that evening.

"Well, my dear," she said, "it is pleasant to think of going back to those dear people, but I have had a strange presentiment all day that we will never see Norway House again."

He looked at her with all his old-time brightness, and replied; "Well, my dear, Heaven is just as near from England as from Norway House."

After the retirement of the ladies, Evans sat talking with his host. He suddenly grew silent and his host noticed he had slumped in his chair. He moved quickly to his side, but the spirit had already flown. James Evans, at the early age of forty-five, had gone home.

It is not easy to make an adequate appraisal of the life and work of such a man. We have already outlined in some detail his work, his influence with the Indians, the impact of his Christian life and message upon their lives, the provision he made for the enrichment of their literature, music and culture and the consequent enlargement of their minds and spirits. But we have

said little about the man himself. Perhaps little need be said for what he was is eloquently portrayed in what he did. But we could not in justice pass by without a word about his home life. Here was true love and here was sacrifice. We see that love shining through the closing words of a letter to Mrs. Evans, words which are rather quaint to us today but whose sincerity makes its own appeal to our hearts. "I am," he writes, "my very extraordinarily dear and kind and never-to-be forgotten, and more than all others beloved little wife, your indescribably affectionate and unchangeable husband."

We can in imagination enter into the nature of the sacrifice which these two made, far from their own folks, and often separated as he went on the many journeys which took him from James Bay to the Rocky Mountains, journeys "in perils oft," by canoe and dog sled, in heat of summer and in winter's bitter cold, under brilliant northern lights and in smothering blizzards, camping in the open at thirty-five degrees below zero - and only infrequently in those lonely months being able to send a message of affectionate greeting to the one who anxiously awaited his return. Such devotion is only understandable in the light of a loyalty which was dedicated first to the Master whom they served, and then, so enriched, it flowed in deeper channels toward each other. Truly, they had left all to follow Him.

Though James Evans never returned to the scene of his labours, the work went on. Other men took up the trails that led to Indian encampments east, north and west. Indians, far from the river routes, learned how to listen to "birch-bark talk" and asked to be instructed in the deeper truths hidden in the Cree Gospels. His helpers and successors continued the work of translation and eventually the Scriptures were given to the Indians completely in their own tongue. Today they have an enlarged hymn book with over two hundred pages, containing hymns and worship material, and regularly a little magazine, "Spiritual Light,"

printed in the Cree syllabary, finds its way to the camping grounds of all the Indians in the North-West for whom The United Church has responsibility, with its budget of news and Gospel messages. Much of this is original composition in Cree and not translation from English.

All missions to the Indians today in Canada's North-West, whether Roman Catholic, Anglican or United Church, build upon the foundations so truly laid by the creative genius of James Evans. Unlike some of her other great missionary sons James Evans was not buried by the British in Westminster Abbey, but his shrine is a people's soul. For one hundred years his birch-bark syllabics have been read at morning prayers in the light of the rising sun and studied round the camp fire at the end of many a lonely wilderness trail. Fifty years later Rev. Sam Pollard, an English Wesleyan missionary, used the syllabic principle to provide a written language for the Miao, Lolo, Nosu and other aboriginal tribes in the foothills of Thibet. Since the beginning of this century the Laubach method has given the Word of God to millions of illiterates in the Philippines, India and elsewhere. One fundamental in the method is that learning proceeds by teaching another what has already been acquired.

Let us in this centenary year give gratitude to God for James Evans, and consecrate afresh the resources of our great United Church to the still unfinished task of "lightening the darkness" in which so many of God's children still walk.





The Unveiling Ceremony  
James Evans Cairn, Norway House, July 3, 1932.

#### THE JAMES EVANS MEMORIAL BURSARY

The Committee in charge of the Evans Centenary has decided to establish a permanent memorial to Mr. Evans to be known as the James Evans Memorial Bursary; available to candidates for the ministry of The United Church of Canada. The sum of \$10,000 is required to found the Bursary, which will be administered by a special Board of Trustees appointed by the General Council. The Committee requests that our people in every pastoral charge be given the opportunity of contributing to this fund. All contributions should be sent to the Treasurer of the Church, Dr. Robert Laird, 299 Queen Street West, Toronto 2. Special envelopes may be obtained from the Board of Home Missions, Toronto, or the Chairman of the Centenary Committee, Dr. John A. Cormie, Somerset Building, Winnipeg.



PRESENT HUDSON'S BAY POST, NORWAY HOUSE